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SECSTATE PASS AGRICULTURE ELECTRONICALLY, BOGOTA FOR
APHIS/CHEHREZAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/03/2024
TAGS: EAGR ECON PGOV VE ETRD
SUBJECT: REVOLUTIONARY SPUDS: IN VENEZUELA, POLITICS TRUMP
POTATOES

Classified By: Randall Hager, Agricultural AttachQ, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Despite strong interest by Venezuela's private sector to move forward on food trade protocols with the United States, and a recent warming to the topic by SASA, Venezuela's plant and animal health authority, meaningful and timely progress will be difficult. We understand that SASA staff have been called away from their desks to support political activities in the run up to the February 15 amendment referendum, leaving their real work behind. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) SASA is an autonomous agency of the Ministry of Agriculture, but over the last few years has been increasingly packed with staff that lack technical competence, but do have sufficient revolutionary fervor. (Note: One of the decrees put in force by President Chavez last July will purposefully reduce this organization's autonomy, but that change has not taken full effect). Staff are required to participate in political rallies, for example, and only a few scientists who hold tenure can avoid this requirement without fear of losing their jobs. However, this environment is not conducive to protocol development and review, and these professional scientists are marginalized.

¶3. (C) The case of potatoes is the most recent example of a potentially lost opportunity. Industry representatives have noted that Canadian seed potatoes, which make up the majority of imports, have fallen off in quality, and initiated a campaign to develop an updated protocol with the United States. Until now, our potatoes had been ignored given the BRV's lack of interest in working with us. With the urgency of a quickly approaching planting season, the private sector began to lobby for action within the Ministry of Agriculture and SASA. On a parallel track, our APHIS Scientist contacted SASA officials and was granted a meeting to begin preliminary talks. This meeting was to have taken place the week to January 26, but did not take place and is unlikely to be held until after the February 15 referendum. We understand from our contacts that no one is at their desks.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: It is telling that the government would risk losing an opportunity to increase domestic food production to get a few more government functionaries to rallies. Not only could seed potato trade suffer, but protocols for beef, pork, and other products that we have also been working with SASA on could also be delayed or lost.

CAULFIELD